

# Exceptionality Education International

---

Volume 28  
Issue 3 *Teacher Beliefs and Practices*

Article 2

---

12-20-2018

## Teacher Beliefs and Practices: Introduction to the Special Issue

Anne Jordan  
anne.jordan@utoronto.ca

### Abstract

Teacher Beliefs and Practices: Introduction to the Special Issue

ISSN 1918-5227

Pages 5- 9

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/eei>

---

### Recommended Citation

Jordan, A. (2018) Teacher Beliefs and Practices: Introduction to the Special Issue. *Exceptionality Education International*, 28, 5-9. Retrieved from <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/eei/vol28/iss3/2>

This Article - Open Access after 1 year is brought to you by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Exceptionality Education International by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact [jspecht@uwo.ca](mailto:jspecht@uwo.ca).

## **Teacher Beliefs and Practices: Introduction to the Special Issue**

***Anne Jordan, Guest Editor***  
***University of Toronto (OISE)***

Canadian universities and programs for teacher preparation can be justifiably proud of contributing to the international literature a strong line of research and practice on teaching diverse students in modern classrooms. Although this line of enquiry has developed from the base of special education and inclusion of students with special education needs, it is increasingly enriching the broader field of teaching practices at both elementary and secondary levels.

This special issue, *Teacher Beliefs and Practices*, was conceived as a result of the research on general education teachers' beliefs and practices known as the Supporting Effective Teaching (SET) project. The project spanned about 20 years, and was headed by me, Anne Jordan, and colleagues including Paula Stanovich, Henk Demeris, Christine Glenn, Gonul Kircaali-Iftar, Linda Lindsay, Melissa McGee, Donna McGhie-Richmond, Eileen Schwartz, Katherine Underwood, and Robin White at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. At a symposium at the Canadian Association for Educational Psychology conference in 2017, it was apparent that many Canadian researchers had taken up the challenge of examining this field. The Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education had been established at Western University to coordinate various cross-national research on inclusive education, and to support this journal. It was therefore imperative that we bring some of these lines of inquiry together in a special issue. Rather than have it consist solely of Canadian work, in keeping with the mandate of the journal we invited researchers from other countries to contribute their work where it had been influenced by the initial SET project.

The SET project sought to investigate what teachers believe, say, and do when working in regular inclusive elementary classrooms with students with diverse learning needs. It further examined how teachers accommodate learning diversity (disabilities, gifts and talents, risk of school failure). Finally it linked differences in the beliefs about and attitudes of teachers toward teaching students with diverse needs with their practices in their inclusive classrooms, and to differences in student outcomes.

The work is still far from complete, but this special issue shows the progress that has been made to date. The issue begins with three articles that present a comprehensive overview of the original SET project findings. The first paper reviews what is possibly the most important finding of the project: that teachers who subscribe to inclusion and who adapt their instruction to meet the needs of their students with special education needs actually do a better job of engaging all their students in learning, regardless of exceptionality designation. With evidence derived from observing over 100 teachers in inclusive classrooms, the project found that the skills that are prerequisite for effective inclusion of students with disabilities are the skills that are effective for all students.

The second and third papers present the three measures that were developed and tested during the SET project. This is an attempt to document the Pathognomonic-Interventionist (P-I) Interview, the Classroom Observation Scale (COS) and, in the paper by **Glenn**, the Beliefs about Learning and Teaching Questionnaire (BLTQ), which attempted to create a paper-and-pencil version of the labour-intensive P-I Interview. Requests for these measures have come from across the globe, so these articles bring together the characteristics of each measure as well as its contribution to the research literature.

An outstanding question from the overall research is, How are teacher beliefs and attitudes about disability and inclusion developed and influenced? The next group of papers examines the development of teachers' beliefs and attitudes, particularly during the pre-service training period. **Specht and Metsala** present a cross-Canada study that looks at the self-efficacy of teacher candidates and how this impacts their learning about teaching in inclusive settings. **Young, Specht, Hunter, Terreberry, McGhie-Richmond, and Hutchinson** then present their analysis of the major themes that emerge from this study: the challenges and the rewards of behaviour management and creating relationships with students, as well as enhancing academic outcomes, and working with colleagues and fellow teachers.

**Lantermann and Applequist's** article follows the theme of pre-service teacher training with how college courses can have an impact on pre-service teachers' beliefs about disability. The authors distinguish training approaches that emphasize the focus on disability as a medical deficit from those that frame disability as social variance, and then examine how these are understood by teachers in training. Lantermann and Applequist provide evidence that beliefs of pre-service teachers can be influenced by the training they are given.

The final paper by **Kiely** focuses on experienced teachers of literacy at the secondary level. In case studies these exemplary practitioners paint a picture of how they foster relationships with students, and how they calibrate and tailor curriculum for the range of students in their Grade-9 and Grade-10 language arts classes. This in-depth analysis complements the broad description of beliefs and practices that mark good inclusive practices, and sheds light on the complexity of teaching in inclusive settings.

The papers in this issue raise a number of important questions that need to be addressed by both researchers and practitioners as the field evolves:

## 1. How Do We Define and Identify Beliefs?

**Young et al.** (this issue) note that the theoretical history of attitudes and beliefs are strongly intertwined. In a seminal paper Richardson (1996) noted that both are extremely important in the development of teachers. Beliefs refer to psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions that are felt to be true and accepted as a guide for assessing the future, whereas attitudes refer to responding in a favourable or unfavourable way through actions or words based on those beliefs (Richardson, 1996).

In work in other jurisdictions, the term *beliefs* is not used at all, in favour of the term *attitudes* (Ewing, Monsen, & Kielblock, 2017). In a seminal article on the topic, Pajares (1992) called teacher beliefs a “messy construct.”

There has been a longstanding distinction between “medical model” beliefs about disability, which allocate difference to fixed attributes within the child and/or family, and “social model” beliefs that see individual differences as universal, malleable, and subject to change. There are further variants of these distinctions, as noted by Göransson & Nilholm (2014). Beliefs about the nature of disability, inclusion, and teachers’ roles and responsibilities may also be part of larger belief systems about the nature of knowledge, knowing, and ability (Jordan, this issue). Further research into the complex relationship between beliefs and attitudes, and into the knowledge and experiences that can lead to shifts in them, are a crucial direction to be taken in this field of research.

## 2. How and Why do Teacher Beliefs Influence Teaching Practices?

There is a need for more research into the complex relationship between beliefs and practices. Kiely, Brownell, Lauterbach, and Benedict (2014) set up a research agenda for examining this question, but they noted the disconnect between what teachers say they believe and what they do in practice. In the SET project, the Classroom Observation Scale was an attempt to add a third-party observation to the investigation of teachers’ reports of what they believe and how they practise—an empirical anchor to address this complex relationship.

In the papers in this issue, **Specht & Metsala**, **Lanterman & Applequist**, and **Kiely** delve into the relationship between beliefs about disability and inclusive practices through firsthand accounts from teachers themselves. One correlate of beliefs is experience derived from caring for a loved one with a disability—a child, relative, or one’s own disability. These experiences lead to an educator’s perspective on disability that favours inclusion and inclusive practices. To date this finding is anecdotal, but begs for more in-depth examination.

## 3. How Does Teaching Skill Evolve?

A major theme in the literature in this field is how pre-service teachers become inducted into beliefs and practices that favour inclusion, and that in turn lead to effective instruction. In addition to the papers contained in this issue, there have recently been many articles on pre-service teachers’ beliefs and attitudes. As **Lanterman and Applequist** note, challenging negative attitudes and beliefs is no easy task. Beliefs seem to be relatively fixed and resistant to change, so it is notable that initiatives at the pre-

service level, such as those described by Specht's team and Lanterman and Applequist, have had success. At later stages in teachers' professional development such progress is less clear. In a 2007 study, White showed how teachers who do not espouse inclusion are resistant to in-service training, resources, and even pressure to include. These teachers maintained their resistance over five years of the school system's inclusion initiative. Another teacher, the mother of a child with a disability, subscribed to inclusion at the start of the project. She demonstrated the early stages of developing an inclusive teaching style at the outset, and continued to develop an excellent repertoire of inclusive teaching skills over the five years, as a result of this same school system initiative.

Teachers in the later stages of their careers who are committed to inclusive practices may express a shift in beliefs that minimizes the distinction between students with and without special education needs. **Kiely** (this issue) describes the characteristics of experienced secondary school teachers of language arts subjects who subscribe to inclusion. Kiely cites Urbach et al. (2015), who noted that less accomplished teachers in their early teaching careers focus on building relationships and protecting students, while late-career teachers focus on the intensity of instruction and on meeting high academic standards. It is as if the expectations of experienced teachers have shifted to making sure all their students experience academic success, regardless of whether they have a special education designation or not.

#### 4. Special or Not?

Urbach et al.'s observation leads us to the question of whether there is a need to distinguish special from regular education. There is not a great deal of research on secondary school teachers' beliefs and inclusive practices, and on the factors that influence them. The work reported here does raise a nagging theoretical question, however. If exemplary secondary teachers move beyond adapting instruction for students with special education needs by developing a repertoire of teaching skills that demands high academic progress from all their students, why are we maintaining the special–regular education distinction at all? Or, if designation is to ensure that students with exceptional learning needs receive appropriate instruction, is the information attached to their designation useful to teachers to enable such instruction? It is well known that, at the elementary level, teachers who subscribe to inclusion, and who become skilled at adapting instruction and applying the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), may not pay much attention to the formal designation of students as exceptional. A goal of teacher education might be to assist teachers to develop the repertoire of skills modelled by exemplary teachers that result in blurring the special–regular distinction.

The questions then come full circle by returning to how beliefs about disability and inclusion are defined. Is the distinction even needed in an ideal world with excellent teachers? Does designating a student as exceptional serve as an insurance policy against inadequate teaching and resources, and if so, why do educators persist in not tackling the underlying inadequacies? The educational philosophy of Nunavut states that every child is unique and that it is the role of educators to identify and develop each child's unique characteristics. Compare that with the prevailing policy in many school systems that inclusion is about location; the placement of designated students into—or out of—the

classrooms of non-identified, “regular” students. The latter policy is evidently naive at best and possibly headed in the wrong direction by bypassing responsive teaching. Hopefully the outcome of the research reported here is to show what inclusion is really about: excellent teaching that calibrates instruction to learner differences, a sense of teacher self-efficacy in being able to develop the learning and progress of every child, and teacher beliefs about and commitment to one’s ability to make a difference in the learning outcomes of all students.

## References

- Ewing, D. L., Monsen, J. J., & Kielblock, S. (2017). Teachers’ attitudes towards inclusive education: A critical review of published questionnaires. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 34(2), 150–165. doi:10.1080/02667363.2017.1417822
- Göransson, K., & Nilholm, C. (2014). Conceptual diversities and empirical shortcomings—A critical analysis of research on inclusive education. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 29(3), 265–280. doi:10.1080/08856257.2014.933545
- Kiely, M. T., Brownell, M. T., Lauterbach, A. A., & Benedict, A. E. (2014). Teachers’ beliefs about students with special needs and inclusion. In H. Fives & M. G. Gill, (Eds.) *International handbook of research on teacher beliefs* (pp. 475–490). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Pajares, M. F. (1992). Teachers’ beliefs and educational research: Cleaning up a messy construct. *Review of Educational Research* 62(3), 307–332. doi:10.2307/1170741
- Richardson, V. (1996). The role of attitudes and beliefs in learning to teach. In J. Sikula (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teacher education* (pp. 102–119). New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Macmillan.
- Urbach, J., Moore, B. A., Klingner, J. K., Galman, S., Haager, D., Brownell, M. T., & Dingle, M. (2015). “That’s my job”: Comparing the beliefs of more and less accomplished special educators related to their roles and responsibilities. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 38, 323–336. doi:10.1177/0888406415591220
- White, R. (2007). *Characteristics of classroom teachers which contribute to their professional growth in implementing their inclusive classroom practices* (Unpublished Master’s thesis). University of Toronto, Toronto, ON.

## Author’s Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Anne Jordan, Ph.D., Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 252 Bloor St. W., Toronto, ON, M5S 1V6, Canada. Email: anne.jordan@utoronto.ca